What is Polypharmacy and How to Can I Avoid It?

The definition of polypharmacy most commonly used is the taking of five or more medications at the same time. But a more appropriate definition might be the taking of any medication that is not needed. More than just a word, polypharmacy is a risk factor for illness and death. It touches everyone's life either their own or through family members or friends who struggle to deal with managing medications due to costs, follow-up appointments, lab tests, and the ability to take several medications at the right time every day.

It is important to understand the risk that polypharmacy poses and what each person or caregiver can do to reduce medication-related problems. It is not enough to "blindly" take medications prescribed by several separate prescribers or take recommended over-the-counter products based on advertising and marketing, and not question the total drug picture as it applies to your unique mix of health conditions. Increasing awareness among everyone about the causes of and how to avoid medication-related problems can help improve medication use.

Ways to avoid unnecessary medication related problems.

Know the purpose for the drug
One principle that helps fight polypharmacy is to avoid taking medications for which there is no true condition or diagnosis.
Example: Taking Benadryl® or Tylenol PM® (diphenhydramines) every night to sleep when the cause of insomnia is the 8 p.m. cup of coffee. Diphenhydramine causes a whole list of side effects that can lead to other problems, like constipation, urinary retention, changes in heartbeat, dry mouth, and confusion, and then more medications to treat these problems. Why be exposed to another drug when the problem could be solved by addressing the cause of the insomnia?

Recognize potential side effects
If a person is unaware of the side effects a drug may cause, they may think it is just "old age" and end up with another drug to treat a condition that is actually drug induced. Example: A person who is taking a class of antidepressants such as Zoloft® or Prozac® in addition to a pain reliever called Ultram®. Both of these medications can, at high doses, cause tremor. The tremor may be misdiagnosed as Parkinson's disease rather than a side effect of medication, and another drug may be added to control the tremor when removing the offending medications would be the best solution.

Understand potential interactions
Drug-Drug, Drug-Disease and Drug-Food interactions can all be significant when it comes to avoiding medication-related problems. A common example is consuming too many green leafy vegetables (a source of Vitamin K, which reverses the blood thinning effects of the blood thinner Coumadin given to prevent strokes and excessive blood clotting).

Keep medication records or a journal
This is a very valuable tool for combating medication-related problems. The healthcare team often has only the drug list in the chart as a reference without benefit of knowing how many doses were missed, why, and when. Keeping a daily journal that includes what medications were taken and when plus any symptoms experienced is a good practice.

Always carry a current medication list including prescribing doctor's name
The clinic chart usually reflects whatever the medication regimen was at the last visit. The list can change with visits to specialists, hospitalization, or while seeing out-of-town doctors.

Annual brown bag
Place all medications, including over-the-counter medications, herbals, and supplements in a brown bag and bring it in to your doctor's visit at least annually. Include old medications (so the staff can confirm you are not to take them), cough syrup, decongestants … everything!

Inform physician about over-the-counter drug use, herbals, and supplement use
With the endless amount of vitamins, herbal supplements, and over-the-counter drugs on the market, patients are often taking something the physician is unaware of that may be causing symptoms like elevated blood pressure or stomach upset. These symptoms may be treated with a new prescription, hence, more polypharmacy risk! Some herbal supplements have serious side effects. Example: Ginkgo biloba is known to significantly thin the blood. It is used to help increase memory but can be dangerous in that it can cause a stroke or other kinds of serious bleeding.

Be aware of what lab tests should be done annually
Oftentimes drug therapy requires lab tests to monitor for safe use. If the drug was started in the hospital or by a doctor you do not see regularly, be certain that the appropriate monitoring gets done. You can ask your primary care doctor, the prescribing doctor, or pharmacist for help with this information.

Avoid self-medicating
Self-medicating includes adjusting doses without informing your doctor, using an "old" discontinued medication for a flare-up of a condition, or trying out something that worked for a friend. The risk here is that the drug taken may not be appropriate for your current set of conditions and may result in serious consequences, for which the cause would be unknown to the healthcare team because it is not on the record.
Example: If you are in the office with a symptom or at the ER unconscious. Ultimately, as patients and health caregivers, knowledge and communication are the keys.

For More Information: Talk to your Doctor or Pharmacist.

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